

Hexblades with Class

By Skip Williams



This column aims to provide players with tips on creating effective and interesting characters of various types. So whether you're a beginning player creating your very first character or an experienced gamer looking to put some punch into an old standby, this column is for you!

The Pros and Cons of a Hexblade

The hexblade combines supernatural powers, arcane magic, and combat skill into a potent whole. Early in his career, he may find success -- and even simple survival -- elusive. But with good planning, the hexblade can prove a potent and satisfying character at any level of play.

Hexblade Assets

The hexblade offers an effective combination of fighting ability and magical talent, including limited spellcasting ability at higher levels. Your hexblade's flexibility can allow him to fill many roles within an adventuring group, including that of party leader. Below are several assets you have going for you when you choose a hexblade.



- Magical Abilities:** A hexblade begins play with the ability to call down a curse on a foe once per day. This curse won't vanquish an opponent, but it can help the hexblade prevail in combat. As he attains higher levels in the class, the hexblade can use his curse power more often, and it becomes even more potent. He also gains additional magical abilities that can help him survive as well as bedevil his enemies.
- Good Attack Bonus:** A hexblade's base attack bonus is +1 per hexblade level, which is the best in the game. Thus, hexblades can expect to hit what they attack.
- Good Will Saves:** A hexblade uses the best save progression in the game for Will saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural mental strength helps him resist most effects that fool his mind or assault his spirit, including charms, compulsions, illusions, *fear* effects, and even *inflict* spells.
- Good Weapon Selection:** Because a hexblade is proficient with any simple or martial weapon, he's a deadly opponent no matter what he wields.
- High Hit Points:** The hexblade's 10-sided Hit Dice let him absorb lots of damage and keep right on going.
- Spells:** Beginning as early as 4th level, a hexblade gains the ability to cast a few arcane spells, assuming his Charisma score is high enough to permit it. His spell list includes many spells that can improve his combat prowess (such as *magic weapon* and *bull's strength*), as well as generally useful spells (such as

expeditious retreat, invisibility, and scrying).

- **Spontaneous Spellcasting:** A hexblade doesn't have to carry spellbooks; he can choose a personal repertoire of spells that he can cast anytime. He does have a daily limit on the number of spells of each spell level that he can cast, but he can freely cast any spell he knows until he reaches that limit. So he doesn't have to guess ahead of time which spells to prepare -- if he needs to cast a particular spell several times in the same day, he can do so.
- **Familiar:** By spending a little cash, a 4th-level or higher hexblade can gain a familiar that can serve as a spy, lookout, and general assistant.
- **Bonus Feats:** At 5th, 10th, 15th, and 20th level, a hexblade receives a bonus feat that improves his effectiveness as a martial spellcaster.

Hexblade Weaknesses

As with any class in the **D&D** game, the hexblade's advantages come at a price. Below are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a hexblade character.

- **Poor Reflex and Fortitude Saving Throws:** The hexblade has the worst progression for Fortitude and Reflex saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Thus, he isn't so great at avoiding attacks on his body.
- **Mediocre Armor Class:** The fact that a hexblade has proficiency with only light armor and none with shields leaves him with only a mediocre Armor Class. Like a bard, a hexblade wearing light armor has no arcane spell failure chance, but he must accept the normal arcane spell failure chance if he wears heavier armor. So although his Armor Class isn't poor, he does tend to be somewhat vulnerable to damage -- a serious liability for a character who does a great deal of fighting.
- **Limited Spell Choices:** A hexblade doesn't have many spells to choose from on his spell list. Furthermore, once he selects spells, his repertoire remains more or less fixed, except for new additions as he attains higher levels. He has a limited ability to change his repertoire, but for the most part, he is stuck with whatever spells he has chosen.
- **Restricted Alignment:** A hexblade cannot have a good alignment. This limitation doesn't usually present a problem, but it can cause difficulties if his adventuring party includes a paladin, a cleric of a good deity, or some other stalwart do-gooder.

Playing a Classy Hexblade

Great hexblades usually use the following techniques, so try to incorporate a few of them into your strategy when you play this kind of character.

Be Prepared and Flexible

Just because you don't have to choose spells every day doesn't mean you don't have to think ahead. When choosing your personal repertoire of spells, try to make selections that will let you deal with as many different situations as possible. It's hard to go wrong with spells that deal damage, but you have weapons that serve the same purpose. Instead, consider how you plan to fight and select your spells accordingly. Spells such as *magic weapon*, *expeditious retreat*, *false life*, *mirror image*, *hound of doom*, and *cursed blade* make you a better

combatant, so those are good choices if you plan to do most of your fighting with a weapon. Spells such as *cause fear*, *Tasha's hideous laughter*, *summon swarm*, *vampiric touch*, and *enervation*, on the other hand, are useful for attacking foes directly. You might want to include both kinds of choices in your repertoire so that you can use spells to soften up your foes first, then finish them off with weapon attacks.

Fight Smart

Consider your spell selection and preferred fighting style whenever you begin an adventure. If you're primed to fight the enemy, go ahead and take a position in the party's front rank, where you can bring your combat abilities into play quickly. If you've chosen to concentrate on magical assaults, consider a position in the rear. You can still aim your spells properly from behind your allies, and your high hit points and fairly good Armor Class make you an excellent rear guard for any group. If you prefer ranged weaponry to melee attacks, a position in the middle of the group might prove most effective.

In any case, the combination of spell power and combat ability you have available makes you extremely adaptable and flexible in a fight, so be ready to switch tactics when necessary. If you encounter a foe that you can't defeat with spells, just take up a weapon and dive into combat. Conversely, staging a retreat so that you can use a few spells is an excellent way to deal with a foe that can shrug off your physical attacks.

Friends in Need

If you're the only fighting character in your party, you'll have to stand in the front line, even though that position might not fit your combat style and could prove unhealthy for you in the long run. The presence of a fighting ally leaves you with a few more options, but you still need to keep the rest of your group in mind.

The Party's Stealth Person: Your light armor gives you a decent speed, which you might be able to augment even more with a spell. Thus, you're a good candidate to accompany your group's stealth specialist on scouting trips. You can be even more effective in this role if your spell selection includes *invisibility*. But even if you don't accompany the scout, be ready to come to her rescue when necessary. Your combat ability might be just what's needed to pull her out of a jam.

The Party's Other Arcane Spellcaster: You probably aren't the only arcane spellcaster in your party, but you probably have the smallest selection of spells available on any given day. So try to make your fellow spellcasters aware of which spells you have so they can make choices that cover the gaps in your capabilities.

Though their magical prowess exceeds yours, the other arcane spellcasters in the group probably don't have your Armor Class, and they certainly don't have your hit points. So be ready to put yourself between these vulnerable characters and the enemy whenever the need arises.

The Party's Divine Spellcaster: Get friendly and stay friendly with your party's cleric, druid, or paladin -- though friendship with a paladin might be a tall order because of your alignment restrictions. The divine spellcaster's healing spells can keep you in the fight longer, and he may also have some spells that can boost your combat prowess and make up for some of your vulnerabilities -- at least temporarily.

Some Key Equipment

As a fighting character, you must rely heavily on your gear, so it pays to collect the right equipment. The essentials include the following.

- **Armor and Shield:** If you're a hexblade, it generally pays to get the best light armor you can afford because you'll need that boost to your Armor Class. At the beginning of your career, studded leather may be the best your finances allow, but move up to a chain shirt or mithral armor as soon as you can. If you're really serious about fighting and you have a feat slot or two to spare, consider becoming proficient with medium armor or a shield or both. Early in your career, you don't have spells to worry about, so the arcane spell failure chance won't bother you. Later on, when you're casting spells, you probably won't mind the penalty too much if you use spells primarily to augment your combat ability.

You need all the Armor Class you can get, so be sure to acquire some other defensive items, such as *rings of protection* and *amulets of natural armor*, as soon as you can afford them. Keep in mind that several lesser items that stack give you better protection, and at a cheaper price, than one big item.

- **Primary Melee Weapon:** Unless you've opted to carry a shield, choose a two-handed martial weapon, such as a greataxe or a two-handed sword. You just can't beat a big weapon for damage potential, and you want to deal your foes lots of damage before they can retaliate.
- **Backup Melee Weapon:** Always have a light weapon -- or two -- handy. A light slashing weapon, such as a dagger or hand axe, can help get you out of a tight spot (such as being swallowed whole by a big monster). It also pays to have a hefty weapon on hand in case you lose your primary one or find that it isn't effective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage than your primary weapon does. For example, if you normally use a two-handed sword (a slashing weapon), consider a morningstar (which deals both bludgeoning and piercing damage) as a backup.
- **Ranged Weapon:** Even if you prefer melee attacks, you need to choose a martial ranged weapon for those times when you can't reach your foes. Spells can also help at those times, but you can't always rely on magic to do the job against every opponent. A composite bow is a great choice because you can spend a little extra money on it and add your Strength bonus to damage.
- **Backup Spells:** You never know when you'll run out of spells. Furthermore, you never know when you'll need a particular spell -- and need it very badly. So it pays to keep some spellcasting power in reserve via a collection of scrolls, wands, or both. Scrolls are a great way to carry along useful spells (such as *mount* or *scrying*) that you might not use in every adventure. Wands are useful for bread-and-butter spells that you use often, especially spells that enhance your combat ability, such as *magic weapon*, *bull's strength*, or *protection from energy*. Furthermore, both scrolls and wands are a great way to expand your spell selection beyond your personal repertoire. If a spell is on the hexblade spell list, you can use it from a scroll or wand even if you don't know how to cast it yourself.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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